

More evidence that ‘light’ smokes fool the smoker

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A new survey confirms that many smokers are fooling themselves about the benefits of so-called light cigarettes. Research by Professor Janet Hoek from Massey University and Associate Professor Rachel Kennedy and Jeremy Tustin from the University of South Australia involved telephone interviews with 788 respondents from South Australia and New South Wales.

The survey coincided with both countries’ ratification of the World

Health Organisation Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which calls on signatories to review the descriptors used on cigarette packets.

Australia has recently entered into voluntary undertakings with several tobacco companies that will see the elimination of the words “light” and “mild” on cigarette packets. Australian regulators have argued that these words imply health benefits the products do not deliver, and so may mislead and deceive smokers.

Professor Hoek says the new survey shows that a substantial proportion of respondents, both smokers and non-smokers, were confused about what the term “light” means. However, smokers of light cigarettes were much more likely to associate incorrect attributes with them, including that they deliver less tar.

Professor Hoek says although the findings are preliminary, they have important policy implications because they highlight misconceptions among all groups, especially those at greatest risk of being harmed by confusion.

She says it is of particular concern that smokers are more likely to associate healthier attributes with light cigarettes. “Smokers often view light variants as a means of maintaining a smoking habit while minimizing the harm they believe will result from this.”

The report says the tobacco industry has indicated it intends to replace “light” and “mild” with terms such as “fresh”, “fine” and “smooth”.

Professor Hoek says there is an urgent need for more research, particularly into the attributes smokers might associate with these new terms. “There is little point in replacing one misleading term with another.”

She says further research needs to examine the effect cigarette descriptors have on young people at risk of developing a smoking habit. “If the alternative words proposed have a particular appeal to young people, there is a danger they may make smoking more attractive, not less so.”

A paper outlining the research findings won a Best in Track award at the recent Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy conference.

Source: Massey University

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